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Open Writing: The Missing Link?

Exploring academic writing in the open-science era

While community-based research, co-creation, social innovation and similar ideas are increasingly popular as ways to cultivate research with impact in and for society, little attention has been given to the role of writing in achieving this. In this essay, we explore writing in relation to Open Science. What does Open Science mean for researchers' everyday work practices, and thus for academic writing? To address this question, we have developed the term Open Writing. Open Writing relates to the core work of academia (research activities, teaching and supervision) as well as to the larger institutional environment. Specifically, we argue that academic writing, as both process and product, holds the potential to be "the missing link", the medium that connects research-as-practice to the ambitions found in Open Science and the Impact Agenda.

"You have to be open to everything, to be willing to take inspiration from any and all sources. In the same way Cervantes used chivalric romances as the starting point for Don Quixote, or the way Beckett used the standard vaudeville routine as the framework for *Waiting for Godot*, I tried to use certain genre conventions to get to another place, another place altogether."¹

This quote from the American author Paul Auster illustrates what the "open" in Open Writing entails. Open Writing is an academic writing practice that is open to and acknowledges influences and inspirations from a variety of sources. Moreover, Open Writing produces research texts that are open and invi-

tational to the intended reader, texts that aim to offer resonance.²

In and of itself, Open Writing is not special, but this approach to writing is made meaningful through its relationship to the research material and research question. In Open Writing, the researcher asks: *What are the most important aspects of this research process that I want my readers to understand? How do I write in a way that allows my readers to understand and relate to what I say?*

Driving the process is an intention to convey the results of a research endeavour in a way that readers can understand and relate to, thereby allowing them to use the work whether they are readers within or outside academia. Open Writing is a writing practice that results in research texts in which the researcher constructively engages in *doubt, disagreement* and *debate* in order to address and involve readers within and beyond academia.

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Open Writing, Open Science and the Impact Agenda

The Open Science agenda is an influential movement in institutional academia that sheds light on the need for enhanced pub-

lic access to research-based knowledge; it is concerned primarily with the requirements for “open access” and “open data”. Scientific culture has developed around the journal system, wherein research results are primarily published as peer-reviewed papers. While novel means of publishing have evolved and publishing costs have diminished, scientific culture has not embraced this change. In spite of replication crises and a distrust of journal-ranking systems as meaningful impact measures, top-tier journals remain the scholarly community’s main source of recognition and impact. However, a substantial research/practice gap remains, and the ambition of closing this gap is one of the drivers towards institutional change in academia.

The Open Science ideal is that researchers share results, ideas and data earlier and more extensively with one another and the public than they do presently. The hope is that this will open up the research process and enhance the flow of knowledge, both within and beyond academia, so that other researchers and people outside the research communities have access to research-based knowledge. The reasoning is that improved access will lead to improved knowledge and thus improved utilisation and impact in practice for citizens, policy makers and businesses.

Not only governments and funding agencies, but also libraries and universities in European countries consider Open Science a top priority. The role of researchers is considered pivotal in this process of institutional change. As Bartling and Friesike note, “Much will depend upon whether researchers become the leading force within this transition, or whether they play a passive role driven by other stakeholders of the research process. In order to prevent the latter, researchers should be deeply involved in this process, and they should be aware of the potential consequences”.³

We suggest that Open Writing is one way to engage with this transition, to resist and challenge current conventions about what “Open” means. (Social) scientific knowing is never a one-way process, and the notion of

“Open” may also underscore a more reciprocal relationship between academia and non-academia, researcher and field. In the words of Lave, human doing and knowing are flexible engagements with the world in “open-ended processes of improvisation with the social, material and experiential resources at hand”.⁴ Lave proposes that there are no fixed boundaries between activity and its settings; between cognitive, bodily and social forms of activity; or between problems and solutions. The context and the individual, the process and the product, constitute each other and are interwoven.⁵

Engaging with this messy entwinement through our writing is a matter of taking seriously that writing is indeed an *open* process, one informed by our various attachments to the institutions of science, everyday experiences, conversations with colleagues and the readers we intend to reach. This is why we need to reconsider current ideals of academic writing, in which quantity (individualized measurements of publications and citations) thwarts productive openness. That system is alarming, as several studies have shown the unintended detrimental effects of current publication and impact-measurement systems on researcher motivation, publication practices and research quality.⁶ But what is needed?

Based on interviews with academics, Sword has characterized “stylish academic writing” as texts that convey energy, intellectual commitment and “even passion”.⁷ Cribb and Sari argue that good science writing for the public (distinguished from scientific writing for peers) should contain passion.⁸ They state that it must engage both intellect and feelings, that it can be elegant, beautiful and have rhythm and music. We wonder why only the public should be treated so well. Researchers too can get bored and skip reading, and we may occasionally consider whether writing feels laborious because we are bored by our own writing.⁹

However, boredom is only a minor concern; based on reported experiences from several countries,¹⁰ we worry that the current institutional environment produces anxiety through individual performance measure-

ments and acceleration of work requirements that do not support the important, continuous experimentation with academic writing.

Open Writing as Process and Product

Open Writing encapsulates the ambition to devise more collaborative, curious and creative academic writing practices. Crucially, Open Writing is *open* to critique, and we regard a continuous discussion of quality criteria to be essential to our ambition of developing Open Writing further.¹¹ However, this does not entail what we might call an instrumental approach to academic writing or policy; rather, we propose that we revisit what we have believed to be the core characteristics of research, to constructively engage in *doubt*, *disagreement* and *debate* in the process of writing and in the texts we produce.

Doubting, disagreeing and debating are core elements of scientific developments and academic work across disciplines, and in the Open Writing community we explore their significance for academic writing as process and product. Writing academic texts, which are open to *doubt*, might mean that the researcher is explicit about the uncertainties that arose during the research and writing processes. Such transparency is a classic quality criterion in scholarly work, although it is always a mediated transparency, shedding light on certain elements and leaving others out. Engaging doubt in the research process may seem a controversial academic virtue, one often excluded when speaking of “one text, one message” or when calls are made for well-justified causal claims. In our experience, however, attempts to constructively engage with doubts during the research process *and* through our academic writing can be productive, allowing the reader to follow the arguments of the text and to evaluate for herself whether or not she agrees.

Engaging with doubt may also influence the topics that we chose to write about,¹² the influences we draw on or the texts we produce.¹³ This brings us to the next element of Open

Writing: constructively engaging in *disagreement*. In Open Writing, disagreements, much like breakdowns,¹⁴ can be valuable sources of insight and/or produce shifts in thinking and practice. Indeed, disagreement is at the core of the critical academic tradition, and Open Writing aims to emphasize that disagreement not only occurs between academic peers who problematize each other's academic accounts but may have multiple sources related to the research object.

Such disagreements can arise, for example, in researcher/practitioner collaborations, in co-authorships and within and between scholarly fields. In our experience, constructively engaging in disagreement means acknowledging these as valuable sources of insight; they produce insights that we can draw on and include in our academic writing with attention and intention towards conveying the results of our research.

The third element of Open Writing, engaging in *debate*, can be practiced in the individual text. An example of this is when we write texts directed at the reader, paying attention to the quality of our writing in terms of clarity and coherence because we are focused on writing readable texts. Moreover, our texts may also aim to provoke further debate; we want vibrant texts that engage readers and stimulate debate about the arguments we make. Consequently, Open Writing aims to acknowledge that a text that is read is never closed or finished. Rather, the text is open for debate and hopefully evokes resonance with the reader. These are traditional values in writing within and beyond academia, and, in an institutional environment influenced by calls for Open Science and Impact, they are essential to conveying our results in a way that allows others to understand and use them.

In addition to doubt, debate and disagreement, a final element is essential to Open Writing. Open Writing is *open* because we attempt to shape our texts in relation to the specific research question or practical challenge that we are engaged in researching. Open Writing is a fabric of connected practices in which scholars (sometimes including

collaborators outside academia) continually build on one another's work to make the fabric more robust, beautiful or varied.¹⁵

In its essence, Open Writing aims to underscore how developing and maintaining the fabric of academic writing is a collective, ongoing endeavour. Thus, for each research project, Open Writing involves an investigation and experimentation with academic writing that is tied to the nature of the phenomenon we want to write about. When we write about something, we attempt to re-present it in words, and in this process there is an inevitable betrayal of that which we want to express.¹⁶ This is a shared condition for all (academic) writers; our way of minimizing this betrayal is to reflect upon this relationship between research and text, to write about the multiplicity of practices and to seek the style and form best suited to expressing what we want to share with readers.¹⁷

The Open Writing Community

The Open Writing community was co-founded by Charlotte Wegener and Ninna Meier in 2016. It comprises a network of humanities and social-science scholars from various countries and sub-disciplines who are interested in the current role of academic writing in academia. It is a virtually supported, growing community whose members engage in a variety of networks and activities such as collaborative-writing workshops, research and writing activities with practitioners and students and co-authoring of publications.¹⁸

Mirroring the ambition of Open Science, the community aims to contribute to the national and international visions of more democratic knowledge-creation through Open Writing. However, the ambition is not merely to exploit the term "Open" as a sort of Newspeak. The premise of the Open Writing community is that, although various kinds of openness are both important and timely, they do not solve the basic problem that the format and style of most scientific texts make them inaccessible to people outside the research community. The number and extent of open academic journals and databases are of little

relevance if the important explorations and debates that occur there are not understood and/or used by more than a select group of highly specialised scholars. We are *not* arguing against specialised scholarly knowledge and academic debate and development; rather, we are encouraging intention and attention towards, as well as responsibility for (also) writing academic texts that can be read and used by a wider audience.

An important step in this, we believe, is to expand what we have called our "playground of academic writing"¹⁹ to include genres and modalities that give nuanced accounts of *what* we study, *how* we study it and *why* we study it as well as to open our academic writing practices to various kinds of inspirational forces, such as fiction writing, practitioner perspectives, discussions with colleagues and so on. Through Open Writing, we want to explore what academic writing can do in this respect. We want to build a community of researchers in which we help and challenge one another to continually fine-tune our writing skills and write with a sensitivity to the fact that what we convey in writing becomes more than words out in the world.

The way we say things matters. The Open Writing community therefore focuses specifically on writing as a means of strengthening collaboration and, simultaneously, bringing forward research products with appeal and relevance. Through writing as a method of inquiry, researcher/practitioner collaborative writing and skill-building for writing in various genres and formats, we explore how these movements can be approached from the researcher's point of view.

Thus, to take academic writing as process and product seriously in the current environment of academia and to investigate the role and contribution of academic writing as more than a tool for dissemination of results, we need experimentations, continuous meta-reflections on academic writing practices and rigorous feedback mechanisms on research texts. Academic writing is not just a matter of transferring existing knowledge; academic writing *is* knowledge creation. Writing is a research act – an act of world-making.

Open Writing as a Practice and Research Field: What Are We Doing, and Why?

So far, the call for Open Science has gained institutional attention mainly with a focus on structures for its agenda to take place. Open Writing can be understood as an academic grassroots initiative, starting from the researcher's everyday working practices, that seeks to elaborate how academic writing as process and product can be developed and how Open Science can be achieved from the researcher's and research community's point of view.

Moreover, the objective is to ask, through workshops and various research projects with practitioners, what Open Writing entails and how it can be conceptualised and further developed. In the Open Writing community, we have initiated several activities and projects aimed at strengthening writing expertise and building networks across domains and between novice and experienced researchers. These include research publications, social-media outlets, co-authoring and collaborative writing with practitioners, taking editorial responsibility for the journal *Qualitative Studies*, developing the doctoral course *A Writer's Life*²⁰ and initiating and managing NOW – Nordic Open Writing, a Nordic network in which practitioners, researchers and doctoral students engage in various writing experiments together (NOS-HS funded 2017–2020). Our activities also include applying for funding to expand the community through network activities and to initiate new research projects.

Online Resources Related to the Open Writing Community:

- A PhD course: <http://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/arrangementer/arrangement/skriverliv---om-at-blive-og-vaere-et-skrivende-menneske.cid344606>
- Open Writing on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Open_Writing?lang=da
- Open Writing on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/OpenWritingCommunity/>
- Open writings at ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/project/The-Open-Writing-Community>, <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Open-Writing-The-Missing-Link-in-Open-Science>
- CfP *Qualitative Studies*: <https://tidsskrift.dk/qual/announcement>

Notes

1. Auster (1995, 109).
2. Meier & Wegener (2017b).
3. Bartling & Friesike (2013).
4. Lave (1993/2009, 204).
5. Wegener (2016).
6. See e.g. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/03/02/beyond-impact-factors-an-academy-of-management-report-on-measuring-scholarly-impact/>
7. Sword (2012).
8. Cribb & Sari (2010).
9. Richardson & Pierre (2008).
10. See e.g. the LSE Impact Blog for a stream of contributions to the discussion of impact beyond academia. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences> or <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/01/11/new-research-must-be-better-reported-the-future-of-society-depends-on-it/>
11. Wegener, Meier & Elmholt (forthcoming).
12. Wegener, Meier & Maslo (2018).
13. Meier & Wegener (2017a).
14. Alvesson & Kärreman (2011), Latour (2000).
15. Meier & Wegener (2017a)
16. Dayan (2006).
17. Meier & Wegener (2017b).
18. See for instance researchgate <https://www.researchgate.net/project/The-Open-Writing-Community> <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Open-Writing-The-Missing-Link-in-Open-Science>, or Twitter: https://twitter.com/open_writing?lang=da
19. Wegener, Meier & Maslo (2018).
20. <http://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/arrangementer/arrangement/skriverliv---om-at-blive-og-vaere-et-skrivende-menneske.cid344606>

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